

# Scared Straight or Just Scared? The False Promise and Potential Danger of Scared Straight Programs for Youth

---



By: Patricia E. Campie, Ph.D.  
January 17, 2011

*[The following position statement was released by the National Center for Juvenile Justice (NCJJ) in response to the A&E television network's decision to air "Beyond 'Scared Straight,'" a reality TV show about teens being intimidated and humiliated by adult prison inmates in an attempt to scare them "straight." ]*

*Pittsburgh, Pa.* - The National Center for Juvenile Justice (NCJJ) has been the nation's leading authority on juvenile crime statistics and delinquency trends for more than 25 years. NCJJ is the research division of the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges (NCJFCJ), the only judicial membership organization solely dedicated to the education, training, and support of juvenile court judges. NCJJ researchers have studied the most promising practices for reducing, preventing, or delaying delinquency and are extremely concerned that the A&E Network has chosen to air a new reality television show that falsely claims that "Scared Straight" will result in better outcomes and less delinquency<sup>1</sup> among youth participants. In fact, research has shown quite the opposite to be true (delinquency increases)<sup>2</sup> and more troubling - the harm that can be produced by the type of intimidation and humiliation that youth experience in these programs can lead to tragic consequences.

This entertainment reality show is also disturbing because it preys on the fears of frustrated parents. The show promises a panacea for adolescent misbehavior instead of presenting parents with helpful resources and supports that actually work. NCJJ's research confirms the decline in juvenile delinquency over the past 15 years<sup>3</sup>, which many attribute to the improvement in intervention programming based on scientific research on adolescent brain development<sup>4</sup>. These programs exist in many communities across the country and we challenge A&E to use their influence and resources to help these distraught parents and their troubled children gain access to these evidence-based programs that can produce positive youth development outcomes AND reduce delinquency. "Scared Straight" programs do neither.

Furthermore, federal law prohibits youth and adult offenders from being housed together in jails or prisons due to the negative influence and consequences that such interactions can produce<sup>5</sup>.

NCJJ and our colleagues around the country call on A&E to discontinue the dangerous reality entertainment series "Scared Straight" before one of the youth in the program becomes distraught after participating in this humiliating experience on national television and their trauma leads to tragic consequences.

**Dr. Patricia E. Campie** serves as the Director of the National Center for Juvenile Justice [www.ncjj.org](http://www.ncjj.org)

---

<sup>1</sup> Sherman, L.W., Gottfredson, D, MacKenzie, D.L., Eck, J., Reuter, P., Bushway, S. (1997). "Preventing Crime: What works, what doesn't, what's promising. A report to the United States Congress." College Park, MD: University of Maryland, Department of Criminology and Criminal Justice.

<sup>2</sup> Petrosino Anthony, Carolyn Turpin-Petrosino, and John Buehler. "'Scared Straight' and other juvenile awareness programs for preventing juvenile delinquency" (Updated C2 Review). *The Campbell Collaboration Reviews of Intervention and Policy Evaluations (C2-RIPE)*, November, 2003. Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Campbell Collaboration. See also "Scared Straight Programs: Jail and Detention Tours," Anthony J. Schembri, Secretary Florida Department of Juvenile Justice (2006).

<sup>3</sup> See "Juvenile Court Statistics": <http://www.ncjservehttp.org/ncjjwebsite/pdf/icsreports/jcs2007.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> See Peter Greenwood's excellent summary at: [http://advancingebp.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/02/GreenwoodPaper\\_FINAL\\_1-27-10.pdf](http://advancingebp.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/02/GreenwoodPaper_FINAL_1-27-10.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act of 1974 - As Amended Through December 8, 1980 - House of Representatives Subcommittee on Human Resources Public Law 93-415